Submission

- to –

Ministry for the Environment
Biodiversity NPS,
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PROPOSED NATIONAL POLICY STATEMENT on INDIGENOUS BIODIVERSITY

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2 May 2011

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1. Introduction

The New Zealand Forest Owners Association (FOA) has reviewed the Proposed National Policy Statement on Indigenous Biodiversity (NPS) and canvassed its members for input to this submission.

The FOA is an NGO that represents the majority of plantation forest owners in New Zealand. Its members' forests comprise more than 75 per cent of the country's 1.8 million hectares of plantation forestry. The Association adds value to the businesses of its members by undertaking activities which could not be handled easily or efficiently by individual growers working alone. Its credibility also relies on the fact it has the support of the majority of New Zealand's production forest owners.

Areas and habitats of indigenous species occur on private land and there is the need to balance the rights of the land owner with the need to protect some of these species and habitats.

The NPS needs to acknowledge:

1.1. That forestry differs from most other primary land uses in the time frame that is required for a crop to mature and be harvested. While growing to maturity, planted forests are very important as refugia or corridors for indigenous biodiversity. Typically in New Zealand the rotation age is between 28 and 60 years, depending on site and species. While the crop is maturing, biodiversity values within the stand will change and may evolve to contain important species (including a number of threatened species) which have been able to take advantage of the stability of the environment for a substantial period of time. However, once the crop is mature, it must be harvested to provide a return for the crop owner. Harvesting and replanting may significantly affect biodiversity in the short term, but are essential if forestry is to compete against other land-uses and be an important part of the New Zealand environmental scene.

1.2. The loss of plantation forests to other land uses, including recently dairying, has resulted in the loss of indigenous biodiversity at a regional scale. A more explicit reference to the role of planted forests will bring greater clarity and recognition to the potential value of planted forests over other land uses.

1.3. The importance of the sustainable management of New Zealand's planted forests - as a productive land use, plantation forestry has a long and well established record in sustainable management. Over 1,146,000ha of New Zealand's planted estate are currently certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, an internationally recognised measure of well-managed forests.

Whilst acknowledging the value of planted forests as habitats for indigenous biodiversity, the NPS should not seek to restrict the operations of forest managers where those actions are clearly guided by sustainable forest management objectives and practices. **It is essential that because plantation**

forest operations deliver high levels of biodiversity compared to most other commercial land uses, that plantation forest operations are not disadvantaged compared to these other competing land uses.

1.4. When regarding biodiversity recognition must be given that in a given ecosystem there are usually some species that have evolved to take advantage of all the successional states in that ecosystem. Some species will prefer recently disturbed areas (harvested) while others will prefer middle-aged or older forests. The best way to preserve biodiversity is to ensure a range of habitats is available throughout the forest. Most plantation forests in New Zealand are managed on this basis to give consistent production. Any restrictions to protect habitat at crop maturity will by default disrupt this cycle, potentially reducing habitat for those species reliant on the cutover for habitat such as the NZ falcon.

The following are our specific submissions on individual sections of the proposed NPS.

2. Interpretation

Regarding the definition of "Indigenous vegetation", FOA supports the definition and in particular strongly endorses the wording: "but excludes plantations and vegetation that have been established for commercial harvesting". We are, however, concerned that the status of indigenous understory that grows up under plantation forests is somewhat unclear. We therefore recommend the addition of "and all associated indigenous understory", as follows:

> **Indigenous vegetation** means any local indigenous plant community through the course of its growth or succession consisting primarily of native species and habitats normally associated with that vegetation type, soil or ecosystem or having the potential to develop these characteristics. It includes vegetation with these characteristics that has been regenerated with human assistance following disturbance or as mitigation for another activity, but excludes plantations and vegetation that have been established for commercial harvesting and all associated indigenous understory.

Indigenous Understory: Require a definition of indigenous understory

3. Policies

Policy 2

A principle concern of the FOA is that Policy 2 appears to direct local authorities to identify potentially large areas of plantation forest as 'significant habitat' by virtue of the high biodiversity values commonly present in a plantation forest.

Of particular concern are clauses:

b. indigenous vegetation or habitats associated with sand dunes

> Regarding sand dunes, we caution a blanket approach here. Sand dunes can aggressively encroach over any other land use, including crops and infrastructure such as buildings, roads, etc. Successful stabilisation can require large scale planting of exotic species. A requirement to identify 'indigenous vegetation or habitats associated with sand dunes' potentially includes large areas of plantation forest planted for sand dune stabilisation.

c. indigenous vegetation of habitats associated with wetlands

> Typically wetlands tend to be over represented in plantation forests by comparison to adjacent farmland that has been drained to create more productive land. It is unclear but plantation forests adjacent to wetlands could potentially be considered as habitats associated with wetlands.

e. habitats of threatened and at-risk species.

> Studies have confirmed a number of threatened and at-risk species regularly inhabit plantation forests, both in the growing phase and the cutover. In particular species such as long-tailed bats are believed to be wide-spread in plantation forests throughout New Zealand.

In our view Policy 2 will result in large areas of productive forest being identified as significant, with associated controls to protect such vegetation. This goes well beyond current practice by local authorities who have to date identified very little, if any, plantation forest as significant.

To address the above concerns we recommend amending the introductory paragraph of policy 2 as follows:

> In considering the effects of any matter, local authorities shall, in addition to any area of significant indigenous vegetation or a significant habitat of indigenous fauna identified in, or by, provisions of any relevant regional policy statement, or regional or district plan, regard the following as significant indigenous vegetation or significant habitat of indigenous fauna *but excluding plantations that have been established for commercial harvesting and all associated indigenous understory:*

Policy 4

FOA supports the requirement for councils to map/schedule sites to give certainty to landowners.

However, for the same reasons to that outlined in our submission on Policy 2, we recommend amending Policy 4 as follows:

> "District plans and any relevant regional plans shall identify, using (where practical) maps and/or schedules, areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna but exclude plantations that have been established for commercial harvesting and all associated indigenous understory)"……

Policy 6

FOA is concerned at the implications of Policy 6 c and d for plantation forests. Policy 6 e requires decision makers to 'encourage the retention of existing vegetation, whether indigenous or not .. that provides habitat for indigenous species, seasonal food source for indigenous species, ecological linkage between areas and habitats … and a buffer to indigenous vegetation' clearly has serious implications for plantation forests that provide all of these services. Clause e of Policy 6 would subsequently appear to require forests to undertake mitigation or offsetting at the time of harvest, when vegetation is removed.

Such an approach is inequitable, effectively penalising plantation forestry for the biodiversity values that it provides, and again goes well beyond any current resource management approaches of regulatory authorities.

We recommend amendment of Clause c of Policy 6 as follows:

> c. encourage the retention of existing vegetation, whether indigenous or not (but not including recognised pest plants *and plantations that have been established for commercial harvesting and all associated indigenous understory),* that provides:

4. Conclusion

Government policy has long recognised the public benefit of forestry through measures such as erosion control planting and related afforestation grants. Most recently, the government has sought to reward the individual forestry investor by ascribing a carbon credit value to some afforestation activities.

The NPS as proposed is in our view a potentially retrograde step, where the public interest in biodiversity becomes a regulatory and financial risk to investment in plantation forests. FOA would urge amendment to the NPS to not only remove penalties to those that provide biodiversity values, but instead provide a basis for financially rewarding those landowners, including forestry investors, who provide or maintain valued biodiversity.

Ideally, the NPS could provide a basis for some system of payment for ecosystem services. More simply, it could prescribe rates and or tax relief in proportion to the costs of biodiversity prescribed by regulation.

FOA is keen to raise the profile of plantations as valuable for indigenous biodiversity – and thereby ecosystem services – while recognising that forest managers should not be compromised in their ability to manage their forests for commercial purposes .

Glen Mackie
for David Rhodes
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